



THE TREATMENT OF EPIDEMIC CHOLERA.

BY

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"THE PSEUDO-SCIENCES;" "RETROSPECTIVE MEDICINE;" "IDENTITY OF
SPORADIC AND EPIDEMIC CHOLERA,
WITH SOME ACCOUNT OF A PERFECTLY EFFECTUAL MODE OF TREATMENT," ETC. ETC.;
AND TRANSLATOR OF M. TROUSSEAU'S CLINICAL LECTURES,
DELIVERED AT THE HOTEL-DIEU, 1855-6-7; OF
M. CLAUDE BERNARD'S "EXPERIMENTAL PHYSIOLOGY APPLIED TO MEDICINE," 1857;
ETC. ETC. ETC.

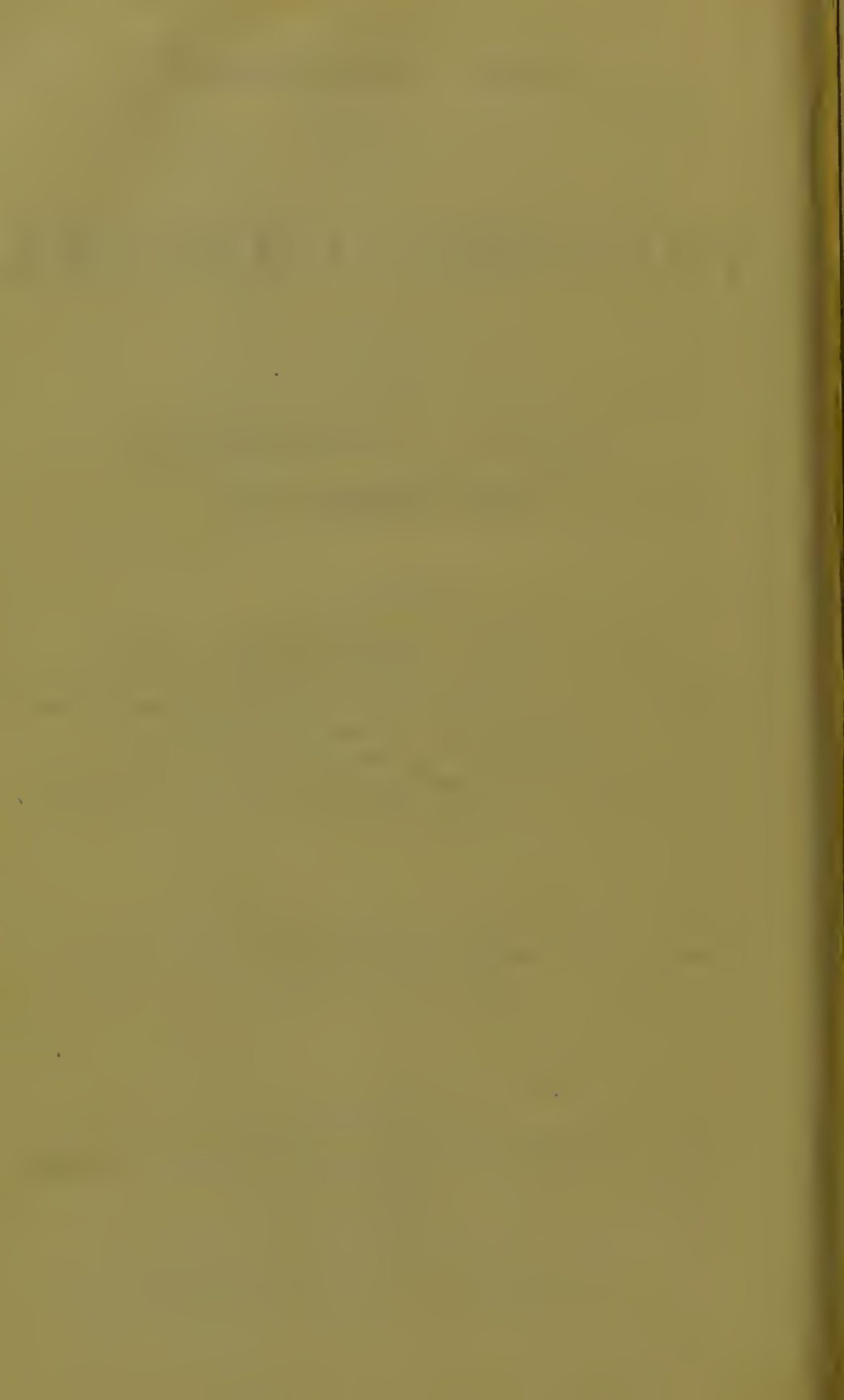
"Escribir epistolas es el mas libre modo, y mas llencioso para decir quanto ay."—GRACIAN.

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TREATMENT OF EPIDEMIC CHOLERA.



TO THE EDITOR OF THE MEDICAL CIRCULAR.

SIR,

IN the MEDICAL CIRCULAR of this morning, you have favoured your numerous readers with "Dr Billing's Opinion of Cholera," and after citing some passages (from his "First Principles," I believe), you go on to say that "the Doctor is remarkable for the boldness and originality of his views,"—a remark which but few persons will be inclined to dispute; and you also add that "recommendation coming from so high an authority certainly deserves trial." I believe, Sir, that in the whole practice of physic there is nothing so clear and intelligible as authority; and were its value in practice to bear any proportion to its clearness and its general free-

dom from ambiguity, then might order yet take the place of the present chaos of opinions on the pathology and therapeutics of cholera ; and the bitter reproach, so lately uttered by M. Forget,* against the whole Medical Profession on that account, be yet blotted out and forgotten. But authority, besides its clearness and intelligibility, would have, in these two questions, another very obvious and very happy advantage : it would save those who take the authority of others for their guide from all that perplexity which they might possibly suffer were they but for a moment to glance at that multitude of crude and irreconcilable notions uttered and published on the pathology and treatment of this *the most tractable of all acute diseases*. As Mr Ross, in a very recent number of the MEDICAL CIRCULAR, has most eloquently dissuaded every one, even the merest tyro, from paying undue deference to the authority of names, I hope he will now allow one who has no great pretensions to belong to that class to examine, though in a

* Gazette des Hôpitaux.

cursory, yet, I hope, in an impartial manner, the grounds for that deference which he would have his readers show for the views of Dr Billing, so far, I mean, as they regard the treatment of cholera.

Notwithstanding the many graphic descriptions of cholera which Dr Billing *might* have perused, had he been so inclined, it would yet appear that the Author of “First Principles of Medicine,” though a professed teacher of the ignorant, and a metropolitan physician too of high standing, knew nothing of the disease, or at least could form no intelligible notion of cholera, until, as he speaks, he “encountered the enemy hand to hand,” when a flood of new light seems at once to have broken in to dissipate the thick darkness which had so long beclouded his view. What then took place? This simply: the Doctor saw with his own eyes, and “saw at once”—so he says—“that cholera is a species of fever, of a fresh type.” Whether Dr Billing was the first to see this does not certainly appear; but he is modest enough to divide his great claim to merit; for he says—after announcing that

cholera is a species of fever, of a fresh type—"this is already granted by some," though "to others who hear it for the first time" he thinks "it may seem a startling assertion." There may be ambiguity in the words "a species of fever, of a fresh type;" but that epidemic cholera is neither a new disease nor a disease of a fresh type, but is, on the contrary, as old as any disease of which we have record, I think I have already sufficiently shown in the pages of the MEDICAL CIRCULAR. So far, then, there seems to be no great reason for taking Dr Billing for a guide on these subjects. But as no pathologist has yet seen so clearly into the intimate nature of fever as to be able to give a definition that would satisfy even that perpetual novice, "A Student at Guy's," there might be some difficulty in refuting that part of the "startling assertion" (that cholera is a fever),—if, indeed, that can be properly called an assertion, where the talented Doctor says he "saw at once" that cholera is a fever. Between this instantaneous, intuitive knowledge, and certain inferences thence to be deduced, however, not so much as an instant of doubt

seems to have intervened ; and the Doctor jumps at once to his conclusion—overjoyed, no doubt, with the greatness of the discovery and the big importance of the consequent deduction ; and so at once puts his “therefore” on record—therefore, says he, “the proper remedies” for cholera “are fever-medicines, and to avoid what is hurtful.”

“To avoid what is hurtful” must seem to most of your readers a novel article of *materia medica* ; but as Dr Billing mentions it especially as one of his “fever-medicines,” no serious objection need be raised to the peculiar novelty of its character. As to “fever-medicines,” however, of a more substantive kind—if there be any class of medicines that can be so designated—such medicines, as a class, must exist only in the head of the loose, illogical thinker ; for, from the days of Dioscorides down to the learned doctors of these days, what article of *materia medica*, from arsenic to decoction of broomtwigs, infusion of hay, or tincture of turniptops, has not been recommended, lauded, and honoured, as “fever-medicines ?” Such articles are in number so great, and the pretensions of many so well supported, that you might

defy the Sybil herself to say which are and which are not "fever-medicines."* Has Dr Billing, then, proved too much, seeing his deduction includes only the whole *materia medica* "from China to Peru?" They who take the Doctor for a guide, and follow him thus far, would probably be puzzled to make a selection. But if, in this, the Doctor, like Johnny Gilpin, went farther than he intended, so, like Gilpin, he comes back with undeviating speed, and seeing the embarrassment to which they who adhere to his "First Principles" would be reduced, like a skilful leader, the Doctor advances, wooden sword in hand, and with one blow severs the inextricable noose, and so finds at once a short cut from a worse and deeper slough than the wash at Edmonton. "Indirect treatment," says he—and the words should be remarked—"indirect treatment I know to be the most successful in

* The notion of "fever-medicines" is surely not far removed from the notion of a stereotyped prescription for influenza—a disease which, would the Doctor take the trouble to peruse the accounts of the various epidemics, from those described by Pechlin downwards, he would find had varied in its symptoms about as much as the seasons and climates had varied in which those epidemics had been observed.

cholera." Now, Sir, what would be considered indirect treatment in cholera? There are present, sickness, vomiting, and failure of the circulation. "Antimony produces sickness, and lowers the circulation."* Treatment, then, with antimony would surely be considered sufficiently indirect; as much so, possibly (at least in cholera), as putting out a man's eyes would be considered the indirect means of restoring his eyesight. Dr Billing at once gets out of the dilemma of choosing a "fever-medicine" from the whole *materia medica* by directing a portion of tartar emetic, and another portion of Epsom-salt, to be dissolved in water, and given every half-hour; and this, he says, he knows "is the appropriate treatment for the disease" (p. 251).† But does Dr Billing come out of this *mêlée* unscathed? Has he not, somewhat inadvertently and with his own wooden sword, made

* Billing's "First Principles," p. 69.

† The homœopath who, with ignorant conceit, would thrust aside Dr Billing's book as unworthy of his regard, or perhaps as too ponderous for his gossamer intellect,—ignorant, too, of the good that lies before him, will probably long remain uninformed of this beautiful example of the *similia similibus* recommended on so high an authority.

an accidental gash in his coat of mail, deep enough to show what "stuff" it is made of? Dr Billing, in thus recommending, rather pointedly, the indirect treatment, forgets what Dr Billing has said on this very subject in another part of his "First Principles." At page 239, speaking of this very thing, the "indirect practice," he says: "I do not admit this term (!), and NEVER practise indirectly; my indications are always founded upon *PHYSIOLOGY*."* When, however, tartar-emetic and Epsom salt "cannot possibly be had" (p. 253) — great consumption may imply great scarcity—Dr Billing directs the following as an exquisite substitute:

Half-a-pint of water ;

A large tablespoonful of common table salt ;

A large tablespoonful of flour of mustard ;

A large—

I thought the Doctor about to say a large swallow,

* "The first step towards treating disease successfully is to ascertain, as far as possible, the nature of the functional or structural alteration which has taken place in the seat of the disease, in one word, the *PATHOLOGY*."—"First Principles," p. 1. When *physiology* and *pathology* shall mean the same thing, and nothing but the same thing, then will Dr Billing, in the first page of his book, be perfectly reconciled with his gainsayer, Dr Billing, in page 239.

but there is nothing said of that—all these to be mixed, and a tablespoonful given every half-hour. Behold, then, another “fever-medicine” — so Dr Billing calls it—taken from the kitchen, far better—the invention is certainly more modern—than James’s fever-powder, the German Doctor’s fever-drops, or even the cabalistic scraps of Evangelistius (See Ursinus). Surely this mixture of ingredients from the kitchen-table, being a “fever-medicine” κατ’ ἐξοχήν, and recommended on such high authority, will work its wonders ; and the black vomit, the jungle fever, and the plague, black, green, or blue, become in the presence of Dr Billing’s culinary mixture things as little feared as the worm-eaten tooth of the wooden serpent that decorates the dusty window of some toy-shop in the environs of Seven Dials. Unlike some authors whom we have read, Dr Billing seems a writer of such easy comprehension that the whole of his ratiocination may be seen at once as clearly at least as the Doctor sees that cholera is a cold fever, to be cured by salt and mustard. His reasoning, then, is this: “I know that cholera is a fever, and a fever besides of a fresh type. Therefore, in cholera

I give 'fever-medicine;' and, moreover, as the type of this fever is *fresh*, I give salt, and having given salt, I also give mustard, which I know to be most appropriate."

Cholera, then, is a cold fever, to be cured by salt and mustard, or anything else from the kitchen table, provided it be nothing to obviate the rapidity of the disease, or be founded on rational experience and observation. Above all, give nothing that would stay the vomiting and diarrhœa, for that, as I have elsewhere shown,* would be to put a sudden stop to the disease. More especially, do not give Dover's powder and cold water in the way I there so strongly recommend; for that, as I have found in many hundred cases, would be to obviate that primary condition of the stomach and intestines from which all the other symptoms proceed, as well as to restore the circulation, the natural warmth of the body, the secretions, etc., and save the patient from

* "The Identity of Sporadic and Epidemic Cholera; or, the Whole Subject of Cholera in a Nut-Shell. With some Account of a Perfectly Effectual Mode of Treatment." Macleachlan and Stewart, Edinburgh, 1854.

the miserable death which awaits those who take medicines (surely not remedies) suggested by false reasoning, caprice, or prejudice, and prescribed only for SECONDARY symptoms, while that primary, idiopathic affection *on which all these depend, and from which they proceed*, is either disregarded, or is aggravated by tartrate of antimony, hot brandy and water, salt, mustard, cayenne pepper, turpentine, castor-oil, or calomel.

I must not put a stop to this lengthened communication, however, without doing Dr Billing the justice to add that he recommends COLD WATER,—a remedy in high and deserved repute long before Dr Billing had an existence, and found of admirable efficacy when given freely and without any admixture of salt, mustard, or tartrate of antimony.

The Reporters of the Treatment Committee of the Board of Health seem haunted with the notion that if “collapse be superseded by the early use of opium,” the alternative must be consecutive fever. I beg, through the medium of the MEDICAL CIRCULAR, to assure those gentlemen, that in upwards of four hundred cases occurring

in my practice in 1849, in the treatment of which I gave opium with unrestrained liberality, not only did the mortality not amount to two *per cent.*, but I had not, in all that number, even one case of secondary fever.

I am, Sir, &c.,

JAMES J. ROBERTSON.

October 10, 1855.

THE PSEUDO-SCIENCES.

(SECOND PART.)

“Evinces on the part of its author great acuteness and extensive learning.”—Dr W. SHEPPARD, Author of the “Life of Lorenzo de Medici,” etc.

M. CLAUDE BERNARD'S EXPERIMENTAL PHYSIOLOGY APPLIED TO MEDICINE.

“The admirable translation of M. Claude Bernard's Treatise on Physiology.”—EDITOR of the MEDICAL CIRCULAR.

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(1855-6-7.)

“Lectures, which it is superfluous to praise, by M. Trousseau, who is at the present moment one of the most eminent teachers of medicine in Paris. The remarkable correctness, elegance, and force with which these Lectures have been rendered into English. . . . The perspicuity and elegance of the translation must be clear to the most cursory reader.”—EDITOR of the MEDICAL CIRCULAR.

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